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# A Few Good Things

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*University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*

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A FEW GOOD THINGS

by  
Rachel Byars Tran

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2017

Approved by

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Advisor: Professor Derrick Harriell

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Reader: Professor Blair Hobbs

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Reader: Professor Beth Ann Fennelly

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*To Miki—  
For making every day worth the effort.*

*To Liem—  
For being mine.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A thousand thanks to Derrick Harriell, who took me on out of pity and helped make this thesis something worth being proud of. I could not have finished this project without your kind critiques, careful instruction, and unending patience. Over the last year you have helped guide me toward becoming the writer I want to be, and I will always thank you for that.

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Thank you to Liem, who hasn't read a single one of these poems, but has listened to me complain about all of them.

And thank you to my parents—you guys have set the example time and time again. You make me believe in myself even when I don't want to. I can't ever stop thanking you for that.

ABSTRACT  
A FEW GOOD THINGS  
(Under the direction of Derrick Harriell)

This thesis is a collection of poetry dealing with depression, the body, love, family, poverty, and the slow ache of memory.

## **Ruminations on *A Few Good Things***

This project was born out of a desire to explore my abilities as an artist; it became an opportunity to explore myself as a person. In this collection, I walk the roads of my childhood, watch carefully the adult I have become, and speculate with great trepidation the woman I will be. Here, I write about depression, the body, love, family, poverty, and the slow ache of memory.

The first poem I wrote specifically for this collection was “*BRUCE/OXFORD*”—which describes in brief images the two towns I have spent the last twenty years alternating between. I did so without realizing how much “home” would become the underlying theme for nearly every other piece I wrote. As such, I have divided this thesis into a three-part chronology: the past, the present, and the future. Each moment in time in its own way uncovers what “home” has meant to me, and what it will mean to me, for all the years of my life.

To write forty-some-odd poems, one must be willing to wade through a great deal of literature that is concerned not only with a completed product, but also with the skills and sensibilities necessary to craft a well-made work of art. The first step taken in this project was to read Kim Addonizio’s and Dorianne Laux’s *The Poet’s Companion*. The first few chapters of the book are concerned with the different types of subject matter often comprised in a poem, and each chapter’s end offers a list of questions and/or prompts that may help a poet to start writing. These prompts proved invaluable in my attempt to create a collection. For example, prompts such as “Write about what you do on a daily basis,” “Write about a ritual that accompanies death,” and “In what ways do you feel privileged?” led to the construction of my own poems like “Running,” “A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral,” and “Privilege.”

How does one go about making the mundane seem extraordinary? With “Running,” I focused on the landscape that surrounded the speaker. Asphalt that is still “soft/enough for our feet/to leave gently dented/imprints,” and a winter cold that is “caustic” in the throat. I ended on the image of two people—the speaker and a companion—made small as “two dark cinders.” Not only does this zoom the lens out from the speaker and remind readers of how insignificant an action is taking place, but it also allows the tone of the poem to take on a quiet brevity—much like the feeling I experience when running.

*The Poet’s Companion* was littered with samples of poems that were meant to inspire a budding artist. Rita Dove’s “After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time Before Bed” was one such poem. Dove’s use of the supposed erotic alongside the innocent inquiries of a three-year-old allows for a sharp contrast that only serves to highlight the question of womanhood. At what point does a vagina become a corrupted thing? Dove begins her poem by writing, “My daughter spreads her legs/to find her vagina:/hairless.” The speaker then details how her daughter demands to be shown the speaker’s vagina in return. Dove writes, “the same glazed/tunnel, layered sequences./She is three; that makes this/innocent.” The speaker is aware of a line between girlhood and womanhood that the daughter does not understand. Dove blurs this line by having the image of two vaginas at two different stages in life stand next to one another in the same “innocent” scene. The ideas Dove presents here are the same ones that inspired my poem “On Learning About Womanhood (and How to Pass It On),” which is concerned with my own struggles and misunderstandings with womanhood from the age of six, to the age of twelve, thirteen, eighteen, and twenty-two, and which culminates in a similar experience with a three-year-old child who is just beginning to understand her own body.

While “Learning” attempts to end on a note of contentment and comfortability with self, a great deal of my other body poems are written with the understanding that it is difficult to love a body that is



not up to societal code. “Got the Morbs,” “A Non-Comprehensive List of the Things I Don’t Like About My Body,” and “Belly Fat” were all poems I wrote in response to the question—“what do you find difficult to love about yourself?” While “Got the Morbs” is a poem addressed to a lover who cannot understand the difficulties of living with depression—who denies the existence of such a disease, even—“A Non-Comprehensive List” and “Belly Fat” are both concerned solely with the physical body, and namely the issues I have accepting my own. Though “A Non-Comprehensive List” was spurred on by nothing more than a particularly dark moment of self-loathing, “Belly Fat” was the result of a prompt presented to me by the poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil.

As an acknowledgement of her efforts as a teacher, which are unparalleled, but also as an acknowledgement of what she has inspired in this thesis specifically, I must expound upon Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Throughout my time in her Advanced Poetry Course, Nezhukumatathil presented a series of writing challenges, each designed to enhance her student writers’ abilities to observe, analyze, and record the world in a way that felt unprecedented and unexpected. Under her tutelage, we created beautiful things. “A Poem About Dragon Fruit and Teeth Whitening” and “Why I Write” (among others) were the direct result of Nezhukumatathil’s prodding.

“A Poem About Dragon Fruit and Teeth Whitening” recounts two episodes I experienced during my time in Vietnam. At the urging of my husband’s family, I tried dragon fruit and had my teeth professionally whitened. While eating dragon fruit is not a particularly spectacular event, it was something I did solely out of a desire to please my parents-in-law. When Nezhukumatathil instructed us to write a poem “about a fruit that isn’t about a fruit,” I realized I had gotten my teeth whitened for the same reason—because somebody had asked me to.

Prior to hearing Nezhukumatathil’s prompt, I had never considered why I write. It was something I began doing at a young age for no other reason than I had a knack for it. It wasn’t until I

reached the end of that poem that I realized I was fueled by a desire to create for my children a world better than the one I had been born into. That seems a common enough reason, but I hadn't known this was *my* reason until I had finished the first draft of "Why I Write."

Do not misunderstand: my professors and the contemporary poets I have studied influenced more than just the subject matter of my poems. Ross Gay's award-winning collection *catalog of unabashed gratitude* introduced me to an entirely new style of poetry. Gay's utter disdain for punctuation allowed for exceptional fluidity in his collection; this was something I tried to mimic in "Baptism" and "Pulling Out My Own Splinter by Myself, For the First Time, Age 25." For both poems, the purpose of sacrificing punctuation was to create for readers a feeling of urgency, of quickness, and of eagerness—the same feelings one might experience if doing something irrational, like jumping into a canal, or if trying to end a painful experience, like digging out a splinter.

In "Belly Fat," I adopted Gay's use of the word "Friends" to address my audience. The intimacy of such a word draws readers in immediately, and the personal nature of the poem—the confidence issues that come with having fat, force them to read the poem as though it were a friend, or a sibling, lamenting their body.

Gay's use of long-line couplets became for me a standard of sorts. I returned to the form again and again to create what I believe to be three of the strongest poems of my collection: "In My Closet," "Privilege," and "From the Camaraderie of Poor Folk." While these three contain quite a bit more punctuation than Gay included in his poems (except, perhaps, for "In My Closet"), the effect achieved was essentially the same: the poem became a gray area between "poetry" and "fiction." The long lines

allowed for a distinct narrative to emerge while the heavy use of metaphor and simile kept the piece “poetic.”

Much like Nezhukumatathil, Blair Hobbs is a poet and a professor whose instruction was instrumental in the creation of several of my pieces. Hobbs was my introduction into poetic form—in its original arrangement, “Hiraeth/Southbound” was a ghazal. But because it was about three hundred words too many to be considered true to form, “Hiraeth/Southbound” was remade into the much less structured poem it is now. Several weeks after Hobbs’ class, however, I revisited the ghazal to create “January 27.” Where the ghazal had failed for “Hiraeth/Southbound,” it became crucial for “January 27.” The repetition of “land” allowed me to emphasize the indignation and horror I felt on behalf of the residents of seven countries who were no longer permitted entrance into the US.

“Ode to the Otter Pop” and “Sunday, After Church” were both created under the guidance of Hobbs. The Otter Pop was a sweet treat I loved dearly as a child; so, when Hobbs first introduced me to the ode, it seemed only fitting that I should address a confection that had been the focus of many of my younger days. In “Ode to the Otter Pop,” I used a great deal of alliteration (“Sweet summer syrup/sticky nectar,” “Arctic aisle aborigine”) and short lines to quicken the pace of the poem. Traditionally, shorter lines create a slower read, but the presence of aforementioned alliteration—as well as the use of assonance and the extended Otter Pop/French Revolution metaphor—allowed for a fast-paced poem.

Of course, neither of those poems, nor any of the other poems in this collection, would have been possible without heavy editing and a concentrated effort on my part to make each poem the best possible version of itself.

Over the last four years, I have been privileged to meet some of the most renowned writers this country has to offer. Whenever I speak with these writers, regardless of their position as poets, novelists,

playwrights, etc., I always ask them what they find to be the most difficult part of the writing process. Without fail, the unanimous response has been: *revision*.

To revise a work is to look at art you have produced, a thing that is very much part of yourself, and to tell it that it is not good enough. You have to be willing to pull an Abraham and put your child on the chopping block.

And revision is lengthy. It takes months to perfect what took only days to create. It is difficult to look at the same poem a hundred times, to change the same line over and over, to move a single punctuation mark back and forth, without starting to hate the poem and yourself. But this is necessary. From revision is born the best of what a writer can be.

When I first started revising *A Few Good Things*, I began with the poems that had the least issues. I made slight changes in enjambment to allow for more fluidity in the poem; I adjusted stanza breaks to create longer pauses; and I changed diction to connote more specific tones. These were the easy fixes. Poems like “A Night Out” and “For Ann and Catherine, Whoever They are Now” featured small—but ultimately essential—alterations like this.

Other poems suffered heavier losses. “Ode to the Otter Pop,” “Photograph of Towels Out to Dry in a Mississippi Yard, c. 1955,” and “A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral” were each originally over double the length of their completed versions. “For My Mother” lost its entire final stanza. These poems and more were whittled down to the bones of themselves, all for the purpose of creating a more organic piece. They had become bogged down by extended stanzas and overly-expositional lines that I had enjoyed writing—and still enjoy reading—but that were a detriment to the overall success of the poem.

Poems like “Sunday, After Church” and “Hiraeth/Southbound” were treated quite the opposite. Where some poems required cut after cut, others required a cracking open. For “Sunday, After Church,”

the original was a little longer than a haiku, but grew into a poem with seven stanzas. “Hiraeth/Southbound” was bound in a traditional ghazal form that severely damaged the emotion I was trying to convey. What was meant to be a comment on the relationship between a mother and a daughter became restricted and unfeeling. By allowing myself to let go of the repetition “home” at the end of every second line, I was able to achieve a much more developed piece.

And some poems were rewritten entirely. “A Non-Comprehensive List of the Things I Don’t Like About My Body” kept nothing of its original self. Initially, I had intended to use light, capricious imagery to depict a dark theme, but failed to do so entirely. Ultimately, one half of the poem became very similar to “Belly Fat” in nature—an ode to the body I could not make myself love. The second half reversed this and became an ode to the parts of me I do love. This was one of the earliest poems I wrote for this collection and one of the last poems I revised. In doing so, I was gifted the great realization that it more than okay if the product you are left with is entirely different to the product you began with. That is, at least partially, the purpose of revision.

Of course, revision is not limited to the body of a poem. A great deal of the pieces featured here began their lives under much different titles. “Learning” became “On Learning About Womanhood (and How to Pass It On)”; “Clothing” became “I Didn’t Realize How Much of Kindergarten I Experienced Through Clothing”; “Eulogy” became “A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral.” I rarely explicitly state what my poems are about within the text; in changing the titles of these poems, I was able to create for readers a clearer understanding of what events or subject matters my poems hoped to address. For this collection, the title is necessary for understanding the poem. They often specify the nature of the speaker and the intended audience. The first version of “Future Scene from a Car Ride With My Half-Vietnamese Daughter” was titled “When She Leaves.” This led to a great deal of confusion for my readers who didn’t understand who “she” was or why she was leaving. Forcing

myself to come up with more specific, more detailed titles allowed me to understand just how easily a few words can make or break a poem.

The majority of the works presented in this collection were reactionary in nature. They were responses to prompts from professors, manuals, and a myriad of published poets who ranged from Donika Kelly to Sarah Kay to Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib. They were written not only in an attempt to justify the time I have spent at the University of Mississippi, but as proof to myself that I am as capable as any other writer out there, so long as I am willing to put in the same amount of dedication and effort.

There was a conscience effort on my part to address issues that are continuously at the forefront of my mind: namely, sexuality and gender. And as happy as I am with the poems that do broach these topics, I feel it would be remiss to write this entire introduction without acknowledging those things not seen in my collection. As a child of the American South, I have had a long and complex history with a multitude of social issues: race, religion, class inequality. The fact that these topics are hardly mentioned in any of my poems bothers me.

But one of the greatest understandings I have gathered from this project is that there will always be things left unsaid—there will always be things that could have been done differently. It is the job of the artist to both accept this inevitability and to rage against it, always. The artist must persist, however vainly, to push themselves to the furthest reach of their limits and beyond, to create even when what is created is an ugly thing—to resist, even when the fight seems futile. I tried and failed many times before I completed the poems seen here. Some, I would not change a thing about; in fact, a few have not been changed at all. Still, I feel others have not yet reached their greatest potential. But with every poem, I attempted to create something that was and is a testament to what I wish to leave behind as a writer.

I publish this thesis with the knowledge that even if it is not all I wanted it to be, it will still be the first stone in a long road of artistic innovation. I will still continue to write and revise and struggle until there are no words left.





## A Few Good Things



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I. BEEN

## Hiraeth/Southbound [A Note to My Mother About Growing Up & Coming Home]

We began this story under fluorescents,  
you (screaming) & me (squalling). I was blue  
you, too when they wheeled  
my fishtank away.

You threw out the name books  
red, your favorite  
so I am called after blood  
and this love, unlanguageable

Me—small, maybe five— pulled  
into the black you held my hand over the stars  
you named them *constellations* [*big dipper, little dipper; great bear, little bear*]

In New York  
I foraged beneath a great gray canopy wide as southern nights but less  
clear  
dug through the garbage ‘til I found your stories  
hiding (where I left them)

A Thursday, the woods still green memory and a newness  
the baby in my arms named for blood knows only concrete

you guide her barefoot over clovers  
somewhere, a girl hums a wave crashes  
we walk

## A Memory, 2001

The future sits across an empty bay  
and is hollow there. When my sister  
calls I heard the wind and it echoed,  
like fire, and we were two acorns

throbbing in the copper earth. Summer  
and all things red; if I had been quicker,  
or else if the nettle had grown slower,  
maybe the heat could have stayed

longer and fuller, and happy at our  
sweet return. I am still hurting that  
hunger, running my fingertips over  
those days, wishing, and calling,

and pushing my soot face against  
a nylon net until the screen breaks  
and I am sprawled against the wood, thinking  
this is the first July  
I have spent without water.

## I Didn't Realize How Much of Kindergarten I Experienced Through Clothing

I do not know there are children  
who have never met 4 AM, me  
in my *Lion King* pajamas—  
a cinnamon toast prodigy, I know  
where the butter and the bread  
are kept—I can find them in the dark.

The television is a monster housed  
in varnished wood and sat heavy  
on our wilting carpet. I adjust the knobs  
until Kay Bain in her Lane Bryant heather gray  
three piece ensemble becomes an explosion  
of unnatural colors. She reads off a teleprompter,  
then forgets the words,  
then laughs at herself, and her voice  
is an echo that reverberates  
across the shadows of my living room  
and through twenty years of remembering.

Mom wraps bologna sandwiches in  
newspaper and shoves them in our coats.  
Mine is a velvet affair with neon planets  
that I stroke again and again  
until the fabric is worn through  
and the planets are dark blobs  
like someone has adjusted their knobs  
and left them to implode, colorless.

I cry when I wear an all-white jogging suit,  
and I beg to be dressed  
in the same checked dress for a week—  
the one with a metal chain strung  
across the collar that feels  
like a grown up's necklace  
circling my throat. There is a boy,

Jonah, who wears too big t-shirts  
crusted in jelly and biscuit. Thanksgiving,  
the class holds a feast made bright  
with construction paper cutouts  
and homemade feather headdresses—  
they fill up our bowls with a soup  
they say the pilgrims ate. We know  
there is no eating this food, which



has too many green things, too many  
garden things, too many things  
that at home would be hidden  
under a napkin. We know this, but Jonah  
doesn't. He swallows bowl after  
bowl until he is a Willy Wonka girl  
and then his shirt is washed  
in new stains: carrot oranges, squash  
yellows, tomato reds. My mother

knows every factory in town, her  
shirts are all smocks, her jeans  
are all torn, when she comes home,  
a ring of midnight all around her, I pick  
loose threads from her sleeves  
and roll them into balls for me  
and my sister to flick back and forth.  
One ball hits the circular tan  
line on my mother's finger—she smiles,  
perhaps weakly, and pockets  
the ring she has been twisting round

and round. It is a bulbous  
thing, with a dull green rock at its center.  
It leaves a dent in her corduroys.

## Photograph of Towels Out to Dry in a Mississippi Yard, c. 1955

Their lives have been washed  
and pressed  
single file.

They are worn through,  
wrung and wrinkled,  
wrought with fraying holes,  
that stray  
here & there—  
left to grow coarse  
and untouchable  
in the noonday heat,  
their skin like deserts,  
harsh and dry,  
starch scorching.

Worn linens, who  
when new,  
smelled of lilac  
and inhabited the  
highest pedestals—  
the bar beside the tub,  
the shelf above the sink,  
the oven door handle.

Now,  
they are shoved  
into back drawers,  
splintered cabinets,  
and jagged baskets,  
given names, like  
“the orange one,”  
“the striped one,”  
used to mop up grease spills  
and urine  
or to wipe the hands  
of those too downtrodden  
to know  
what wholeness  
feels like.

They are hung  
without wooden-peg  
luxury. Bleached beggars  
wrapped over  
and pinned,  
like sinners,  
on a barbwire line.

## On Biting

I must have been a fire-devil, hellion  
kind of child if the scars  
I left on Alex and Thomas and Diane  
and all the little children on the playground  
who got in my way say anything,

and though I never tell my mother, and the  
teachers never believed what the other  
little children said, I still remember  
that hard porcelain already yellowed  
carving memories into the skin

of fat little children and me a bit littler  
easy to dismiss and full of so much,  
like maybe anger, and probably anger,  
mostly just anger that would grow  
and stretch when I was bigger

until it became sadness and self-loathing  
and the biting turned inward and then  
outward again and all the longsleeves  
never hid me like I wanted.

## The Derma House Fridge, 1999

This is the belly of our house: a white monolith belching  
blanched crowder peas still rich with garden smells

and a glass plate I am made to hold with two hands, it's surface  
a grease wet paper towel sheltering a family of hand-breaded

chicken strips and livers my Daddy loves so good. They are  
hot balls of iron that I spit into a pile for Half-Pint-the-feist

to lick and gobble until Granny swats him with the dusty end  
of the broom. Me, the kindergarten artist, rewrites the skin

of the fridge with multicolored letter tattoos, their hard plastic  
bodies spelling out words I still cannot read, and Crayola

masterpieces—*this is Mama's red dress, look I drew a cat  
with spots and seven paws*. This is where we hang my child

hood, its still beating heart splashed across the humming  
canvas, protecting the jewels inside: Lil Debbie's raisin cookie

delight and the cheap Piggly Wiggly bread loaf Granny  
keeps hidden from the mold. Two bottles of Diet Coke,

a battalion of frozen popsicles, vanilla ice cream we made our-  
selves, wrapped in cellophane porkchops, repurposed butter

bowls homing carrot-beans-and-corn stew, egg cartons whose  
insides came from Clucky our backyard chicken and not

the milk aisle at the store. A blue and white bag of sugar  
with its top rolled down and a layer of the sweet white snow

crusting to the edge of the paper, shoved to the back rack  
where the ants will never think to look. A yellowed bottle

of buttermilk Poppy tricks me into drinking, I spit it out  
near the chicken liver pyramid, and rummage in the bottom

drawer for a sweet thing, any sweet thing, to strip my tongue  
its bitterness. Granny pulls flour and butter—never margarine,

she won't have it in her house—from the ice chest menagerie.

She wants to teach me how to make cookies

what I make is not cookies, but a half burnt  
sheet pan of unrolled, uncut dough that even the fridge

can't stomach. Daddy eats them anyway, calls them delicious  
in a voice that doesn't mock, wipes my cheeks and helps me clean

off a shelf to store them on. They sit, unappealing, beside the Mason  
jar of lard and the still green tomatoes waiting patiently

to be sliced, breaded, and fried. We slide the bacon and heap the cheeses until I understand  
there is always room for the things that matter

even rotting, even sour, even burnt.

## Ode to the Otter Pop

I borrow mama's good scissors  
the ones she saves for sewing  
and lay you out  
like Marie Antoinette.  
I do not cringe at the sound  
of your guillotine;  
I have grown accustomed  
to the beheading,  
and I anticipate too much  
the riches you promise.

Sweet summer syrup,  
sticky nectar,  
stainer of childhood  
nightgowns,  
frozen juice in a cell  
ophane wrapper—  
let us have you!  
Louie-Bloo, my first  
French lover, you sing  
the blues  
(and spill them too).

You are the last gift  
my grandmother gives me,  
in front of the fireplace,  
before a court  
of unappreciative parents,  
who imagine me  
unruly and  
unruly.  
You will sink  
in the belly of  
my body, will  
leave me shaking  
from the rush.  
My mother will hide you  
in the places I cannot reach,  
will wrap you in  
paper coats, to  
save my hands the sting.

## Mole Eulogy

Sweet rat babies I loved so well—  
why do we have so many cats?

And I never dreamed of being a funeral  
director, not this young, but your bodies

are the shapes of graves and my little  
hands are born shovels, so I will dig

these holes and name them after you. By  
lunch time Daddy will have given up telling me

*stop touching those nasty things* and will  
instead supply my tree root funeral home with

Doublemint wrappers and Piggly Wiggly paper towel  
shrouds that will cradle you into the tomb.

The cats will yowl their dirge, a song to the wasted  
snack, stolen before it could fill a stomach, and I

will read from my Jr. Bible until your souls  
are safe in the house of my grandmother

who will keep you fed until I find you again.  
When Daddy is not looking, I will bury

my nose into the soft fur of your belly, I will fill  
my lungs with that sweet scent, and then lower

I will push you until your old self is just a heap  
of gray mounded into the mud.

## Woods Behind the Pittsboro House, 2002

The worst valley. A cough.  
A couch. Eating before six.  
Calling Mama at work. *Are you*  
*coming home yet.* The wind  
on my neck. Rough bark  
and treeburn, slipping.  
Terrain I thought I knew, empty  
hands and skin given back.  
A bridge. I never fell,  
not once. Abandoned kitchens.  
Ladybird buried, with her doll  
she stole from me on my birthday.  
I pray, still. The clearing is bright.  
I sleep on moss

in the sun.



## First Grade Autobiography

We live in the woods  
with no name. There  
is a half-built tree

house—a ladder,  
a floor, but no roof  
and no walls. We are  
never warm. A roly  
poly on the timber

doesn't know we have  
stolen him from his  
home to ours, and Dad

is a loose balloon memory,  
a fond dot of red floating  
in the back of our minds, buried  
in the sky, a passing visitor  
in gardens we can't reach.

A dandelion grows  
under my toes. I am a sunburnt  
sea lion. In the ditch we house  
abandoned kitchens, make mausoleums  
of their plastic, their dirt stains,  
and the two hamster carcasses  
resting there. When I grow up,

I want to be a dentist.  
I make my stuffed lion  
and my stuffed bulldog  
and all my naked Barbies wait  
in line outside the office I build  
in my mother's bedroom.

I leave offerings to the hummingbirds,  
hoping. They deliver messages, I hear  
if you are a good one. I try  
to be a good one.

I write out what I can spell,  
and even what I can't, and leave  
it on bits of scrolled paper  
in their feeder, the one I hung

from a branch near my tree  
house. It swings, half-empty,  
until a bird with a fat worm  
clasped tightly in its beak  
and worm juice all down  
its plumage lands and balances  
the plastic cage.

## Baptism

Annie was the first girl  
Besides me to go swimming in the  
Canal, though she left her  
Dreadlocks tied up high in an  
Elastic band that snapped and  
Folded and kept her hair from  
Getting wet which was good cause I  
Heard you're not supposed to get them wet and  
I don't know much about hair or  
Jumping, but I swear she dove face first into the water,  
Knees curled to her chest and  
Lungs sweating like she had never  
Meant to leave the water and  
Now she was finally going home, and  
Over the next few minutes she  
Pulled herself back up to the sky and  
Quenched the need for air and her locks were wet but she went  
Right back down, to the bottom,  
Somewhere near the edge of the world, until her  
Toes touched a rough and sandy  
Underbelly and her legs knocked at the earth's  
Very first layer of rock that lay covered in plant  
Xylem and rich bone molasses and she  
Yowled, no yelped, no yelled like a communion-drunk  
Zealot that she was never going back.

## For Ann and Catherine, Whoever They Are Now

Bare back on the open waves,  
mouths swinging and speaking dreams  
*do you remember that time do you?*  
of course  
I do. It was summer, our  
bodies just learning  
to be women, and learning that *fat*  
was not said  
kindly.  
A Gator rade bottle, wrapper  
half-shed, buried in the muck.  
Your dad screamed when you didn't  
fit into clothes, *do you remember?*  
Of course, I do. Your uncle told you  
to wear a hat because he didn't know which side of you  
was the top. At your aunt's funeral. *Remember that?*  
Catherine threw up  
every day that summer.  
She stole pills, her mom was  
a nurse, I think she pretended  
not to see.

*I remember.*

we wade out into the water until our roundest parts have been drowned and you say they were just assholes, just jealous assholes who would say anything to make us feel bad and we're grown now and it's *better*, but nothing lets me forget that back then they joked and you laughed and I laughed and no one noticed the things in our eyes that turned to stone and sank to the floors of our bellies.

## II. AM



## *BRUCE*

Chicken manure  
strewn across a barren field, clumped  
black earth and moist worms.  
In the winter,  
cows will come  
to eat the leftover grass.

Blackberries  
that grow fresh and unbidden  
on Aunt Judy's farm.  
No one planted them;  
everybody picks them.  
They are tart on the tongue.

Honeysuckle  
winding its way up  
an aged and looming evergreen.  
The kudzu is gnawing  
hungry at the higher branches;  
it is a danger to them both.

The sawmill,  
horns that blow  
at the late hours,  
stodgy workers  
yelling to men in hardhats  
long after the sun has set.

Barley and bluegrass,  
our organic mattress,  
soft and airy, like stepping  
on feathered water. Bare  
feet and callouses  
drowning.

## *OXFORD*

Morning dew  
dressing uniform lawns,  
crooked finger and cocked  
eyebrow beckoning  
joggers to early morning  
runs.

Mama's tea,  
sugar rich, molassed  
palette. A clinking glass,  
the edge rimmed  
with sweat, put on a coaster  
if you value your life.

Red brick,  
perfectly weathered, strung across  
the town like telephone lines.  
Buildings erected  
indiscriminately, their mayfly  
lives quick and patterned.

Smoke rumbled voices  
pour out stories,  
chimney like. We didn't  
know anything about life  
and neither do you.  
They cough.

Worn leather shoes,  
supple and perfectly fitted.  
We climb hills like mountains,  
unbury gold in the woods—  
an abandoned train tunnel.  
A lonesome creek.

## To My Dad, Who is as Scared as I am About Me Moving Away

This is a thing I'm not good at saying  
that my skin is a bird  
and the city wants roosting—

the bricks here are molded and soft  
with lichen that grows skyward  
and this is a thing I'm not good at saying:

I still hold your face in my heart these days  
and I want to make sorry, and tell you  
that my skin is a bird

I never told it to fly, but the bricks  
they spoke and said I'm a sparrow  
and the city wants roosting.



## For My Mother

I never could wash myself  
of my mother's language.  
The syllables she sang  
to me in our old rocking  
chair are still my lullabies. She  
called me Sissy all my life, I  
think I killed her

when I was twelve  
and shied away from her  
and all her nicknames. I  
will never forgive myself  
for denying her, for thinking  
myself too good for her kind  
of vocabulary. In college,

my best friend laughed  
at the way I said 'picture'  
*why don't you pronounce the C?*  
I never thought before  
about the heirloom  
tongue she had passed  
me, the tarnished silver and  
slurred vowels. I touch

my tongue now and feel where  
she touched it before, and there  
are holes that held my grandmother's  
voice and a uvula that rumbles  
with the song of a thousand  
more grandmothers. I let her  
call me Sissy now, though she never does.

## A Night Out

Follow me to a place where you cannot pronounce the names  
and forget the tongue your mother gave you:

I will teach you how to breathe fire  
and we will get drunk on moonlight  
absinthe and the brine of the sea,

the bar will feel heady, you will stumble,  
and I will carry you up the mountain—  
do not be afraid of monsters  
or the memories they keep safe for us  
they remember far past the dying.

My mother would say: may you be in heaven  
half an hour before the devil knows you're dead  
we are not dead now, and this blood  
is still young. If your lungs have  
turned to volcanoes, let them

rest and we will make islands of them in the morning. You  
are breadcrumb fumbling to the door, I am too  
Hansel, too Gretel, not to follow  
you in—I am eager for that sweet  
life and my tongue is foaming.

## Sunday, After Church

She is white-lace dainty,  
eighty years old if a day,  
stockinged feet in kitten heels,  
grandchild on her hips  
and at her knees.

Four of Idaho's best roll  
loose in her cart,  
bouncing off the box of Lipton  
and into the Land O Lakes  
she will drown  
tonight's dinner in.

Triple sweet corn cobbs  
are on aisle three  
just past Sara Lee  
honey wheat,  
across from Great Value,  
nestled in between the bagged  
butter beans  
and the frozen crowder peas.

Her boys, with hands  
like bear-shaped  
honey bottles,  
stick to the Hershey  
stamped sweets set low  
on the endcaps—  
at just their height—  
and fill their soft brown  
corduroy pockets.

Their dark faces pull  
unhappy frowns  
as Granny takes their chocolate  
back,  
piece by piece.

She suffers their whining  
past the aisle eight  
Dixie cups and Kleenex,  
down the aisle nine  
Charmin Ultra Strong and  
Bounty Quicker Picker Uppers.

On aisle ten,

she grabs a fly swatter  
off a dirt-stained shelf  
and reminds two greedy  
behinds what she had said  
about making a scene  
in the store.

## Running

We breathe winter,  
it caustic in our throats.  
The frost gathers,  
atom by atom  
across the lone  
and winding blacktop.

On Wednesday they tarred,  
sulfur carves parietal art  
into our lungs, leaves charcoal  
reminders.

The asphalt is still soft  
enough for our feet  
to leave gently dented  
imprints. Black grit  
and gravel stick  
in the rubber trenches  
of our Nikes,  
unnoticeable pebbles  
that accompany  
every stride.

Our calves and ankles  
sing fire at us,  
our hamstrings  
mutinous. Glaring  
sun—and us,  
two dark cinders  
dotted onto  
a pale gray  
hearth.

## On Loving Someone Who Uses You (On Using Someone Who Loves You)

Ours is a razor burn  
friendship: too much  
friction, not enough  
slickness and no balm  
to salvage the skin  
between us—even Burt's  
best bees can't make  
honey for our stinging  
knees. There is no  
undoing what has  
become of the places  
your hands have found,  
these shins, these underarms,  
these back-of-necks  
have been made valleys  
of red spotted hills  
and still flaming  
car wrecks. My  
homegrown welts made  
for the rubbing, your new  
white jaw made  
for the marking,  
and the tapestry  
of our bodies laid out  
like crabs scuttling  
over a sandfloor sea.

## A Non-Comprehensive List of the Things I Don't Like About My Body

Ten round toes and a flat stubbed nose  
and thighs that stretch my pantyhose

Arms that swing with curtain fat  
and ears the span of a well-brimmed hat

Straight line lips and birthin' hips  
that rip new jeans and break the zips

Belly pooch like teddy bears,  
yellow teeth and armpit hairs

A crooked smile, a broken wrist  
finely tuned to go *click click click*

Squinted eyes, buckled knees  
seven zits, all on my cheek

A tongue that hurts, hands that shake,  
a voice that quivers, stops, and breaks.

## Ode to the Only Body I'll Ever Have

Bet you didn't know a woman could look like this  
bet you thought women were oceans  
and flowers and cars and trees and stars  
and great big metaphors

Bet you thought I came from a goddess, but here I  
am, dirt girl, with hands so soft babies  
sleep soon as their cheek  
hits this white pillow

With a voice plucked from Southern mamas,  
with a voice for singing hymnals,  
with a hip that knows  
how to hold laundry baskets  
and bump doors closed.

I ain't no special one, but damn if I don't think I am.  
This belly'll house somebody one day,  
and these fat thighs have carried  
me up mountains, so forgive me

if I think them too beautiful. You never  
met a body like this, except  
you have—every day  
on the bus, in the schoolyard, behind the  
McDonald's.

Every place, a girl with a body  
and parts to be named  
and mine so much the same as theirs,  
with callouses and cellulite  
and faces steady as stone.

## A Love Poem

If fucking in the Disney World parking lot is what you want, let it be done.  
Though I guess I should say making love  
because we're at that point  
but nothing about this feels like making—  
it is the unmaking,  
the undoing,  
digging under sinuous muscle to find platelets and atoms,  
grasping at your eye to find the lashes curled there,  
pulling your hair from its roots just to tunnel deeper and further  
into the most untouched  
parts of your body, singing the song of your blood  
until you howl in the wind,  
until I taste the heat of your mother's body, that first blood,  
pouring  
over my tongue and into my cavernous stomach. Until  
you are the girl and I am the wolf. Until  
you break and learn to breathe through the cracks. Until  
we are sky birds, shedding sweet down over all the valleys, until  
we are fish rubbing scales against the brownest hollows of the river, until  
the bells ring, until  
the cat cries, until  
a man dressed as Goofy knocks on our windows, which have not fogged,  
and security is twisting their noses and the corners  
of their mouths into open-lipped sneers, until  
I am washed in the body of forgetting, until  
your name is my only word and it is a holy word and the heart  
pounding in my feet  
is burst and throbbing.



## You Were Driving

I looked away  
for just a minute  
and suddenly

all the masterpieces  
had your face  
all the songs

sounded like you  
and every time I opened  
my mouth,

a poem  
with your name  
fell out.

## Belly Fat

Friends, here is the truth  
of my body: it has spent  
the life of itself  
learning to fit  
into smaller places. When  
everything you are  
is a roll  
of cookie dough squeezed  
into plastic coating, when  
you are always  
the round peg  
in a box made  
for hourglasses, always  
the swollen  
limb floating  
aimless in the churning  
waters. When you  
make your mirror  
a liar, close your eyes  
and see thirty pounds  
less of a girl, when  
you make a list  
of enemies,  
write *scale*  
at the top, *calories*  
right under it, your body  
a martyr to your  
own fingernails.  
There is a hurt born.  
A hurt that goes  
nameless but sits curled  
in your blood like  
venom, like heavy  
iron, soaking your throat  
and your thoughts  
and the palms of your hands  
until you bleed  
with the wanting, until  
all you touch turns  
and becomes an untouchable  
thing. Until you spend  
July buried in cotton,  
your skin smothered  
and smothering  
the memories of minds  
who remember the

softness of your  
undressed arms. Until  
you go years without  
knowing your  
naked body. Until  
the world shrinks  
and you are a  
Goliath, one stone  
away from falling.

## Got the Morbs

I'll call it a great gray monster and we'll both know  
what I mean, because gray is sad and monsters

are frightening, any child can tell you this. When I  
make noises in dreams, like screaming, but not—

more like whimpering or like a prayer I swallowed  
that afternoon with two Advils and a Coke,

know it is not you I'm crying for or about, but I  
still appreciate how you shake me awake, the callouses

on your hands are splashes of water, except  
they aren't, they're sandpaper face scrubs,

either way thanks for not leaving me to fight  
my figmented feral killer alone. I cry

on Wednesdays, and during the middle of Mondays,  
sometimes in the bathroom, curled against the tile.

There's no reason for saying this, except that I know  
you've started calling your mother

to ask how to stop me from yelling at pillows  
and cleaning the bathroom, but you're wrong

you should be calling *my* mother, she's the original  
pillow abuser, the first one to grow mold

all over her tile. But really, she isn't, that was my grandmother  
who in '13 drank a rainbow of pills (but only slept

for a while). Maybe this is the reason, maybe  
this is why: I want to tell you I've bought

the hammers for unbuilding this house. I'm disassembling  
the timber to make new pieces of me, but I need you

to remember, however you can, that I've been rotting  
for longer than you've been around, remember

too, how trained I am in splintering.

## A Poem About Dragon Fruit And Teeth Whitening

A meat like blood and a meat like fingernail tips  
and a body that is enflamed lush and leaking, a  
squelch, almost, with black seed sprinkles and juice  
that dribbles out of the corner of my mouth  
and onto my old blue v-neck, the one I got from Martin.

I never put my tongue to the dragon before Vietnam,  
and I never let bleach touch my teeth either, but  
in that kitchen I did anything anybody asked of me,  
so while my teeth were still rich with sting  
and chanting their pain to my teeth roots, I bit into

the flesh and Liem joked and said *be careful it doesn't  
stain your teeth* and that kitchen was made for women  
who eat fruits they never wanted to taste. All  
twenty-eight plus the new budding wise one  
stood straight backed and gleaming but that bleach

was burning my gums and cringe wired my mouth  
into an uncomfortable grimace so when they offered  
the clear plastic bowl I only shook my head  
and shook it again when they offered again  
until I couldn't and they were putting it in my hands, saying,

*try it, try it. You'll like it.*

## Why The Fuck Are We Awake At Four In The Morning (On A Bus In Vietnam)

My eyes burn hot and snotty  
like rheumatoid tomatoes,  
like the fever in toddlers—

it is too early for this kind of adventure.  
The beach will still exist  
at noon, I say, and am ignored. I hug  
the green plush frog pillow and try not to cut myself  
on the metal pieces of the bus  
made for people smaller than me. Everything In  
Vietnam is made for people  
smaller than me. It is one of those days where  
I am shedding all that good  
lunar blood, but not in the beautiful way  
that poets write about; I feel like I am dying  
soaked in my thick blood, in the ugly way  
that poets write about.

Outside, in the half dark, old women  
and one old man stand like open palm  
trees stretching their eager and grasping fingers to a beaded god,  
their bodies twist into a strange half breed of yoga and taichi, two  
unnative beasts in Vietnam  
but welcomed, wholly.

My father-in-law sings along  
to songs I don't recognize,  
his anthem nasally and high pitched, just shouts  
that blister in the early morning, and he  
is a tea kettle whistling to the lonesome tune of a train, they are both  
blowing steam, and every language spoken in  
this country feels foreign to me.

## January 27, 2017 – US Congress and Trump Ban Muslims On Holocaust Remembrance Day

Look at Lady Liberty and see how she weeps, a newborn's tears tracking  
her great stone cheeks for all the little children learning to toddle in a no man's land,

for all the mothers offering a red and swollen breast to babies who only know  
how to cry silently. They are not the first pilgrims to come beating at the gates of this land,

and they are not the first to be turned away, but they are the first I've seen and it makes me  
colder, makes my fingers shake, like a dove, who has leapt from the cliff with nowhere to land,

hands outstretched, grasping, saying, *help me*. This is my honesty: I don't know  
a beautiful way to say *they are dying, and we are doing nothing, and they have no land*

*or home or anything but the skin on their hands that is already stained and cracked  
with the wanting and you still say no and this does not feel like my America, like God's land,*

*this feels like you spit on my grandmother, like you don't remember your own family's  
footsteps, how they walked across Ellis Island, looking for a land*

*that would welcome them* but to just say it, so this is me saying it. This is me hanging  
the banner, clearing the brush away, passing out the visas.

## Privilege

Air conditioners in January remind me of Memphis, the long gray sidewalks that work like bridges between one type of neighborhood

and another, like I am walking through a pop-up book where one page is two frozen yogurt places next to a hot yoga studio and the

next is a chain link fence with sagging holes and seven daycares all wearing the same copyrighted picture of Dora the Explorer on their

unwashed shutters. One time we used iPhone maps to go get sushi and it took us on the quickest route through crumbling parts of the city

and we rolled up our windows because there were people knocking on windows and that felt like the greatest unkindness I ever did,

and I am still sorry to this day. My dad says I'm going to end up with a knife in my stomach, and my husband says this, too, now that I'm married,

because I always give my money to hungry eyed men on the street, and I tell them we all die someday, and I know that's a cliché, I know

that's what every movie character says, but I've always been a giver, even when the giving hurts, and I still I think it's better

to die holding the hand of someone who needed a hand to hold, anyway. I am trying to make this right in my head, but everything

still feels like a half-filled water balloon and I am missing those hot days in August when the sun filled every part of Memphis

and the shoed and the shoeless felt the grass with the same kind of smile and I handed out all my quarters until the grass turned cold and wet.



## Holy Woman

I write the word of my body out  
like pages of holy scripture  
I am an apostle and  
this is apocrypha  
this righteous body  
I am blaspheme  
I am clip-  
winged dove  
flown.

# Granny Rose Makes Us Take the Clippers to her Hair and Does Not Cry Until the End

There is a bridge in Canada there was a bridge in Canada  
seventy-five died in its fire

the young engineers    the new bridge builders  
wear rings of iron

to remind themselves                      how easily                      a thing can  
break

\*

[illegible]

*these are my children*      the strands in her fingers      are swift gray streams slipping  
softly onto the wood

[illegible]

a quiver  
a shake of her lip

a child calls—a cousin still     but younger

she tucks the lip in, holds it between her teeth      sucks up air      her nostrils deep wells

she pulls upright,  
uses the chair arms to lift                      a thousand years pass

she is tall again

I sweep the hair  
pull clumps from the bottom  
pin a few to my shirt  
where they curl  
and remember

## On Learning About Womanhood (and How to Pass It On)

- I. I am fascinated by her pubic hair,  
the way it curls and pulls at the  
skin crease between her thighs. I  
am six and she has given up  
on ever going to the bathroom alone  
again, I consider myself her guard—  
when she goes potty, I offer my  
hand in solidarity. She never takes  
it but she leaves the door open wide  
enough for me and my separation anxiety  
to take up our post against the wood  
panel walls. The black bramble thatch  
is a wild animal and I am wondering  
if I can tame it like I would my Barbie,  
with a plastic comb and sheer  
determination—I am distracted  
by the paper that is blotted red and I do  
not know enough of blood yet.
- II. I watch her from the bedside, my eyes  
like stone, and she already immune to the staring  
hooks the fabric on backwards  
and upside down. She twists it to the front  
and pulls the straps up each arm until her body  
is a caged thing and I come to the understanding  
that this is a technique all women know.
- III. Two miles away from my front door  
I am twelve and scratching at the wide bank  
of skin between my belly and my crotch,  
there is hair long and black, singular  
and curled like the Christmas ribbon on a  
present I cannot wait to open. I have  
forgotten my six-year-old memories  
and do not realize I am tugging at the  
first strand of adulthood; I am too scared  
to tell my mother, afraid this means  
I am dying.
- IV. A year later I hold prayer meetings  
in the shower and cafeteria, on my knees  
in the water I beg for that good blood all  
my friends already know, I ask for the  
swell of my breasts and the rounding of my  
hips—I think I know what a woman is.

At lunch, a girl will walk by, and I will  
think her body righteous, and I will strike up a  
deal with God—*if you just make me that  
pretty, I'll do what you want, God, I'll  
do what you want.*

- V.     There is a party, and I am freshly  
graduated, so I find the shorts my mother  
doesn't know about and the jacket a gay boy  
gave me and wear them with the intention  
of giving, but less than I know. The music  
is a bomb and it is still ticking after I am  
settled on the couch, a boy's hand tucked  
into my breast, an arm curled around  
my waist. Ticking, even a week later when  
the boy takes me on a date, ticking through  
his tongue on mine and that hand again,  
ticking until I am told  
about the bet  
and then I don't listen to music again  
for a long time after that.
- VI.    I am twenty-two, and I have reached  
an acknowledgement of myself that is no  
longer concerned with the standard. She is  
three, a little cousin, who has a mother  
and aunts and more women in her life than a haram,  
but she still watches with rapt attention when I strip  
for the bath. She strokes the hair on my vagina,  
because it is a vagina now and not a crotch or a  
junction or a private part, and has not been  
for a long time, she looks at my breasts  
like they are Disney Princesses, and I smile  
and explain what I can as best I can until she  
loses interests and we climb in the bath water  
run high with tugboats and Barbies.



### III. GOING



## Pulling Out My Own Splinter by Myself, For the First Time, Age 25

A needle whittling under your skin  
to the wood already there you are  
hybrid thing made of earth and blood  
and this is the pain saying what  
you are is not what you should be,  
moist starfish tongue slurps juice  
from your first layer of half opaque  
whiteness and leaves a throb, like  
a Ford with a fan belt issue rattling  
and the voice of your mother  
not corporeal but living in your old head  
whispering to the cliff you've made  
*not much more, just a little longer*  
and the whirl of the nearby table  
fan, set at the highest speed, a chilled  
net to catch the sweat of your body.



## Muddy Paths Make a Sucking Squelching Noise When You Walk in Them Barefoot

When you are a girl who walks in the dirt,  
and I am a girl who walks in the dirt, you  
learn to stay inside when it rains, or  
you learn to love mud on the crust  
of your feet, or you learn where they sell

shoes for the walking. I still don't know  
the street of my home, and the stones have grown  
far from my toes, and I never found a shoe  
they made in the size of a girl whose feet  
are wide slurping swamps,

so I am digging in spades, the heads  
of my feet, to the muck and the mire  
and the goo down below. If they find me  
here walking in dirt and walking in rain,  
tell them beware, tell them stickers grow here.

## Why I Write

Here is how it began:

I am thirteen, the second  
child, learning to box  
the disbelief in myself.

They tell us to write a story, any story. So I write  
about Mama and Daddy, about slow dripping honey and the hungry cows  
in Mr. Nix's backyard. The hay sticks to my clothes  
until I am more grass than girl  
and wide pink sandpaper tongues lick me over until  
I am raw and new. This feels like a cleaning, like  
a birth, and I am thinking, maybe I have found  
something for myself.

Here is how it begins:

the keystroke, the crumpled Walmart receipt,  
the fourth notebook I bought this month, 3 AM, noon,  
six minutes after the plane lands,  
the lead falls and then—

I am the living  
and the dead. Buried  
and walking, like a specter  
that has gone shoe shopping, my feet  
rugged, my hands searching. The gravedigger,  
the unwed mother, the ginger boy in class, a ham  
sandwich, the first orgasm, my grandmother,  
two hundred thousand lost souls, a forest  
in Denmark. I borrow the skin  
of too many, and create from them my own worlds.  
I am all the ones that have ever lived  
and all the ones that never did.

I have a child coming,  
not this year or the next, but maybe  
years after that. I want them to know  
this earth has got a few good things.  
I am thinking if I do this, if I do it right,  
and quickly enough—maybe I'll leave  
a few good things behind.

## A Series of Questions For the Lexicologists I Will Never Meet

Is there a word for the twelfth floor delirium  
that comes when you see the line between skies  
where the rain begins? Or a word for the intestines  
that do jumping jacks in your stomach when the plane  
touches down and the world rights itself  
around you, or else a word for when you  
go to the store twice in one day and both  
times you forget the eggs, even though all you  
needed was eggs, maybe even a word for  
the moment the white powder sinks and sifts  
into the mound of ants and they start keeling  
over, one by one, marching, one may only assume,  
to Zion? A word for the day you discover  
Greek mythology, or the delicates setting  
on the dryer? Is there a word for relearning  
your mother's face? Or eating cereal  
out of a cup? Is there a word bigger than  
forgiving? A word bigger than anger?

Which was the first word? How do I say it?  
Is it tart or bitter or sweet as sugar-dipped  
strawberries on Sundays in the South?

## Future Scene from a Car Ride with My Half-Vietnamese Daughter

We are a happy two—  
wolf & cub,  
due east  
toward the airport  
and the rising sun.

She considers me  
a stubborn compass,  
freckled cheeks &  
yellowed grin—  
a Polaris, a Golden Peg,  
a Northern Star,  
showing her the way  
home.

She is reading a poem  
about Vietnam,  
the words stretch out,  
short and dark,  
asking every question,  
not too unlike herself.

*Did the people of Viet Nam  
use lanterns of stone?*

She tells me about the  
Druids. They, who had  
certainly carried  
lanterns of stone.  
Who had worshipped fire.  
She wonders—  
how it must feel, to capture  
a god, and keep him  
in a stone cage.  
Carry him in hand.  
Use him to light the way.

*Were they inclined to quiet laughter?*

The Druids had laughed,  
she says. Dragging  
the foundations of Stonehenge,  
gleeful at their good fortune.  
And they laughed in Vietnam—  
she had heard it,

carved into the sharp jaw  
bones of her father's face,  
patched into the quiet lines  
of her grandmother's smile.

I tell her about the dry cleaners  
on the corner  
of 5<sup>th</sup> & Lincoln.  
I tell her about the wedding  
dress—  
abandoned now,  
for six months—  
in the front window  
with eggshell lace  
& a pink sale sticker  
& no stains.

In Vietnam, she says  
the dress will be red,  
hemmed with gold beads  
and embroidered cranes,  
their knees crouched  
and wings spread  
always  
ready to fly.  
The mother of the bride  
will weep, as though losing  
a child,  
in order to bring luck  
to the new couple.  
In America, guests will throw rice,  
and the mother of the bride  
will weep,  
for similar reasons.

She has too many questions  
about her own wedding.  
Will she wear white  
or red—  
will her guests throw rice  
or eat it.  
Will I weep for her,  
shower her in  
good-fortune tears,  
or wrap her

in mother arms  
and never let her go.

We are of an age  
where I no longer  
have answers,  
and she no longer  
expects them.  
Instead, she fills  
the silent spaces  
between us with  
off-key singing  
and more poems.

Eventually, we reach  
where we are going,  
me to the drop off zone  
at Kennedy International,  
her to a place where  
I cannot follow.

I watch her back fade  
into the long  
and distant crowd,  
her body a beacon,  
gold and shimmering,  
bright and illuminating  
as fire  
caught in a stone cage.

## From the Camaraderie of Poor Folk

This is us, the learnt, who have built our memories from sticks  
in the backyard and the garbage bags in our living room that

hold what were somebody else's clothes, we who are now grown  
and remaking our lives for the sake of the not-yet-borns who

will never eat always cold food like we did. This is us, in our  
few numbers coming to a communion and here we say:

the potatoes will be potatoes and there will be no hard  
chunks of paper flakes made half solid to gag the swallowing

and all your cars will have doors and pieces that belong to that car,  
and you will keep your cars and no man in a white jumpsuit

with a clipboard will nod his head in compassion and take  
your car anyway. Your green beans and sweet corn will

not be housed in tin, your blue jeans will not come pre-stained  
unless you want them that way, you will not suffocate on the smell

of molded laundry and dollar shampoo, and the dogs will not  
scrounge in your home looking like a lost brother who wears the

same scrawniness and hungry fleas and collar that you do. We  
will take trips to the coast or to the mountains and you will know

what a plane is before you are twenty, and no one will joke when  
you eat your food and drink your drinks because you will not choke

them down like you are fighting for a share. There will be no tens of  
children in your room and shower and bed. Mama will not work a double

shift and daddy will not work a night shift and the word *factory* will  
be something you know about only from picture books. We will

give you pink satin dolls and cold buckets of ice cream and when the  
winter comes there will be a fireplace that smells like logs and smoke

and we will put to ash all those things that poked through the mattress  
and stabbed our arms 'til they bled, years ago.

## A Note to the One Who Will Direct My Funeral

When, at the end  
of my days, you  
stand before the  
congregation,  
wearing black  
and a half-formed  
smile, a hastily  
written eulogy  
clenched in  
your hand, look to  
the crowd, to all  
the ones I left behind,  
and tell them  
I am stardust  
rewritten.

Tell them matter  
doesn't die.  
That our universe  
is the result of the  
same substances  
arranging and  
rearranging themselves.  
Tell them, when I was  
born, I stole ions  
from the stratosphere,  
platelets from  
the soil, handbones  
from the sea.

Tell them, I am  
infinite, the  
combination of a  
thousand million  
lives. Tell them,  
my mother pieced me  
together like a  
patchwork quilt,  
she did not know  
the ocean roaring  
in her belly  
was once a star  
exploding  
three million lightyears



away.

## In My Closet: A Quilt, A Cup, An Obituary, Prize Tickets, and Two Pictures of My Sister

What hands were these that knew the colors of the world  
and put them into a blanket for a granddaughter, not once

but twice, and then three times again, her red and white  
fingers making red and white squares, and the shapes

became a suffering of their own until she could say that this  
was the blanket of her days and she was passing

all of it down to me, and my sister, who sat heavy on the couch  
for three days and did not remember her tongue, even at

the graveyard where a tree grew, a black tree, that was dead  
to the people walking by, but had a thick trunk and hands

made for the uncovering, now I know that the tree was old  
and was a dead thing before my sister or I ever built

kitchens and bunkers and dentist offices and pirate coves  
from the hollow spaces between its roots, and this is not

a metaphor, it's just a tree, but she used to braid my hair  
and tell me about the wind talkers who gave their secrets

to the silence in the branches, so I wrapped her in my best  
cotton coat even though she is thirty pounds lighter

than me and I put her in my car like a toddler or a pug,  
and I rolled down the windows until the wind drowned

out everything we didn't know how to say, and there were a few  
years where I lived in every place but home, but at night

I walked down a hard path to her and my quilts on the living room floor  
where the dust had piled and become an allergen dump

and I would drink Dr. Pepper out of a cup we got at the fair  
our parents took us to in 1999, before my dad read about

a man whose feet were cut off by a Ferris wheel and then Dad  
didn't take us to fairs anymore, but I kept the cup, a red

and white monstrosity with *Coca-Cola* written in script  
on the side and a long bendy straw that scrunched

and folded and was ringed by fingers every time I drank no matter how  
big the fingers were and my sister would eat bread balls

which were just the cheap kind of white bread slices rolled  
in the palms of our hands again and again until they metamorphosed

into fat spheres that she would take gaping bites out of like apples  
and there were no pits to spit out and my cup never held rum, only soda,

and our fingers were never stained with nicotine and we didn't know about taxes,  
but we reached a year where we started thinking of ourselves

as adults whose bodies were too small, whose feet were still attached  
but wandering and the only patterns we had left were stitched in red and white.